

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH CAPTAIN FRANK PONDS, COMMODORE,
USS KEARSARGE VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ SUBJECT: CONTINUING PROMISE '08 TIME:
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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (Chief, New Media Operations, Office of the
Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Commodore Ponds, welcome to the
Bloggers Roundtable this morning. We appreciate you being with us. We're ready
for your opening remarks, sir, whenever you're ready.

CAPT. PONDS: Okay. Well, good morning. How are you doing?

MR. HOLT: Doing all right.

CAPT. PONDS: Very good. I think I got some folks on here that I've
already been familiar with and have met over the past couple of months. And
welcome again to Operation Continuing Promise. And just want to let you know
about its engagement (here ?) as part of Team Continuing Promise. So we're
looking forward to this very enlightening, informative engagement. Let me just
start out by saying this. This mission is still considered a very successful
humanitarian assistance mission of which the primary principles are to establish
and reestablish and reinforce the security, stability and prosperity within the
region. Ours is a commitment, a continuing commitment, of Southern Command's,
United State's as well as now command forces fleet's commitment to the region
itself.

This mission, by all accounts, not just from our perspective but from
the countries that we have visited, has been a success. And as you know, we
have about another five weeks left before we head home on December 2nd back to
Norfolk, Virginia.

Any questions thus far?

MR. HOLT: No, sir.

CAPT. PONDS: Okay. Let me just give you a couple of overviews of what
we've done thus far in the countries that we have visited.

Now, the first three countries or the first countries that we visited
starting with Nicaragua as well as Colombia, those missions were humanitarian
assistance missions. And as you know, we were pulled off of Colombia three days
early and headed up to Haiti on the 8th to conduct a disaster relief mission.
Now, that was a mission that we were sort of fortunate to be in a place to

provide assistance to those individuals that had been ravaged by Hurricanes Hannah, Ike and Gustav.

And you know, it only took us one day to transit up there. And once the storm conditions were safe to operate, I mean, we started support in Haiti right away. And within that small amount of time, we think we did a lot of good.

Still there?

MR. HOLT: Yes, sir.

CAPT. PONDS: So after leaving Haiti, of course, we left and we proceeded on down to the Dominican Republic. And we spent some time there. And then after we finished the HA mission there, we find ourselves right now off the coasts of Trinidad and Tobago, re-energized, conducting our humanitarian assistance mission.

Let me go back to Haiti again. What we did in Haiti was no small feat, only because we were able to do a sea-based mission with a minimum footprint ashore, delivering some much-needed supplies to the folks in Haiti. A snapshot of what we did deliver was we delivered more than 3.3 million pounds of relief supplies and over 30,000 gallons of water to the six primary regions within Haiti as far south as Jacmel and as far north as Port de Paix. And we did that in conjunction with our non-government organizations, working closely with USAID, OFDA, the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, as well as (minutia ?) and our Canadian brethren to deliver those much-needed relief supplies and water and other medical relief supplies.

In addition to that, we use our onboard medical teams to provide assessments of those areas. Also, we conducted some small MEDCAPs in the region to those individuals in those really remote areas.

In addition to that, we used our civil engineers to go around and do infrastructure assessments of the bridge and road conditions. And we left them with a prioritized list of what they should do in order to expeditiously reopen those roadways to those remote areas so they can deliver food and relief supplies by roadway instead of just relying on aviation and circuit support.

So quickly, what we did is we took to Haiti an invaluable asset in the form of lift, aviation and service lift, to those remote areas that could not be normally accessible by the roadways.

(Our ?) copy.

MR. HOLT: All right. Very good, sir.

CAPT. PONDS: Okay. Now, let me give you a summary of what we've done to date as far as the humanitarian assistance mission. And I'm specifically talking about what we've done in Nicaragua, Colombia, Dominican Republic and now here in Trinidad and Tobago.

Trinidad and Tobago aside, just looking at Nicaragua, Colombia and Dominican Republic, we (saw ?) more than 107,337 patients. Now that's saw, that's contacts. And out of those individuals that we saw -- I would use the word "screened" -- we have treated over 34,000 patients.

MR. HOLT: Okay, sir.

CAPT. PONDS: In addition to that, we've dispensed an inordinate amount of pharmaceuticals to the tune of 64,000. We've dispensed thousands of pairs of glasses, conducted over 91 vital med equipment repairs, and we've conducted preventive medicine assessments to over 1,000 individuals and/or organizations. And on top of that, we've treated more than 4,000 animals, whether that be livestock or pets.

Now, we have to do that off the ship. Let me just take you to what we've done on the ship. And this is just not U.S. personnel onboard the ship doing these medical procedures and treatments. We've invited, and they have accepted, and we work shoulder to shoulder and scalpel to scalpel, as I like to say, with the medical physicians and experts in those different countries to conduct over 104 medical procedures onboard the ship itself. And that's a true example of partnership and cooperation. MR. HOLT: Yes, sir, it is.

CAPT. PONDS: Absolutely. Now, let me take you to the dental work. And I mean, that's pretty important because what we've seen here in Trinidad and Tobago is a tremendous need for dental care. And as far as dental care is concerned, we have seen over 2,000 patients. That's a lot of dental work, both onboard and off the ship.

And as you know, we operate with non-government organizations, and I'm going to highlight the three that we've operated with, one being Operation Smile, the second being Project Hope and the third being International Aid.

And some of those dental treatments that we did with Operation Smile was the cleft palate operations and procedures. And I mean, that was a tremendous success. Now, we're no longer operating with Operation Smile, but we still have Project Hope with us and International Aid. And they've been delivering and working with us to deliver some very critical medical treatment and educational seminars to the countries that we've been visiting.

Our copy so far.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir, gotcha loud and clear so far.

CAPT. PONDS: Okay. Well, listen, that's enough for me. I mean, I'm trying to give you the statistics. I know you've got more. But again, our mission, I think, not only in our eyes but in the eyes of the folks that we're trying to help down here, has been a success. It's been about humbling ourselves to deliver what they think that they need, not what we think that they need, and working with them to deliver these critical capabilities.

We've been rebuilding schools. We've been restoring our infrastructure. We've been restoring critical things like clinics and, like I said, libraries, schools and working with the partner nations to make sure it happened. And each and every time we've done something, the greatest gratification that we have been able to receive has been the tremendous thank yous from those individuals that have been the recipients.

And let me take you to the shipboard personnel. They have been a tremendous asset and very capable. And every time we ask for volunteers to go ashore and do things like landscaping work or just to pick up trash or assist with the engineering projects in a non- technical aspect, we have had more hands

that go up than volunteer slots that we can use. And they work from sun up to sun down just to be able to get off the ship and help.

So what I found myself to be is in a position of tremendous honor to be able to lead this team. And that team has consisted of not only U.S., the full spectrum of military forces -- Army, Air Force, Navy, Coast Guard and Marines -- but also working with my non-government organizations that I talked about -- Operation Smile, Project Hope and International Aid.

So we've also had some tremendous support and cooperation and collaboration with our partner nations. Specifically, I'm talking about the Dutch, the Canadians, the Brazilians as well as our brethren from France. So this has been a true interagency, joint, multinational operation delivering much-needed services and what not down in the Central America, South America and Caribbean region. Our copy.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Loud and clear, sir.

CAPT. PONDS: Okay. Well, listen, I'm going to stop now, and I'm going to turn it over to you because I know you've got lots of questions. And I want to make sure I answer them very clearly and I give you all the accurate information that you need because I've come to find out that blogging is a tremendous way to get your word out. And no better where they get it out accurately than to make sure that I give you the answers that you need and they are answers directly from me.

So first of all, I want to say thank you for taking the time out of your day to sit down and entertain my comments. And I look forward to more of the same.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

Maggie, why don't you get us started?

Q Hi. Thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us today. I am very interested in what happened when you had to leave Colombia and head for Haiti. Is there a plan to go back on a future mission and finish what you did in Colombia? Or do you feel like you got to it enough? And what happens on the ship -- did you already have a rough plan? Because you were going in hurricane season, so you knew something was going to happen, or it was likely. And did you already have a rough plan sketched out? What happened?

CAPT. PONDS: Okay. There were lots of questions. I think I can get through them all.

First of all, part of this mission has been preparing for a HA/DR mission, a disaster relief mission. And we planned that. That was part of the mission is how will we have a preplanned response in case this came up. I mean, us being down here during hurricane season, you would think that normally we would avoid this area during this time of the year. But we anticipated there would be a need, so we planned to be able to meet that need. We have a history of doing this because in Bangladesh about this time last year, this very ship was off the coast of Bangladesh delivering much-needed supplies to the citizens after the wake of Hurricane Sidr. So we had preplanned responses for that mission in Haiti. And we had a chance, unfortunately, to execute that mission.

Let's go back to Colombia because that's where your question started. Did we do enough? We did what we could do within the timeframe that we were allowed to do it. Were the Colombians happy with what we had done? Yes, absolutely. If you read the media, I mean, in a snapshot, they'll say that we worked very closely together to deliver what they thought were the priorities. Could we have spent more time there? Absolutely. Every country we go to we can spend more time there, but there are only a finite amount of time to do what needs to get done.

Is there a plan to go back? Yes, there is. There's a plan to go back, and it will be visited, I think, again by USNS Comfort in the year 2009, 2010. So the word "continuing promise" is exactly that. It is a commitment to continue this sort of mission within this region. And so the Colombians, they were satisfied with what we had done because we did exactly what we said we were going to do.

Some of the projects that we didn't get a chance to put the finishing touches on, we either left the material or the goods there. And we worked to turn it over to an organization that would finish the work after we had left. And that's going to be worked with the embassy there in the host nation to finish those jobs.

I think I got all of your questions. Did I?

Q You did, thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right.

Okay, Thomas.

Q Yes, Commodore, Tom Crowes (ph) from (Right State ?).

CAPT. PONDS: Tom, how are you?

Q Doing all right. How are you? Good to hear from you again.

CAPT. PONDS: All right. You, too.

Q How long were you in Haiti?

CAPT. PONDS: Were there from 8 to 26 September. By my math, that's 18 days.

Q Okay. And were COMRAILs able to go out onshore while in Haiti?

CAPT. PONDS: Yeah. I'm sorry I didn't highlight that. Not only did they go out, but that mission could not have been conducted without the COMRAIL folks. Now, here's what happened. When we got there, we were operating primarily from Port-au-Prince. And you know, that's the focal point, the hub of distribution for the logistics of food and what not to leave there and go out to the other areas.

Now, they didn't have a lot of manpower there. There wasn't a whole lot of gear to move stuff around. So we were actually hopping it from the trucks onto the helicopters and from the warehouses onto the trucks and onto the helicopters. So without COMRAIL -- and when I say COMRAIL, I'm not just

talking about the equipment and the material. I'll lump in, you know, my crew here, the captain's crew. And they were pivotal in making that happen.

So not only did they do that from the airport standpoint but from seaport operations. They were actually hopping those large bags of rice, sometimes 55 pounds -- and these were females and males alike -- from the warehouses and from the trucks onto the boats, the LCUs and the LCMs. And then those boats would go up to Gonaives and what not, and those same crew members throughout the day would hump that same rice and those heavy goods from the LCUs down the pier to a distribution point. So yes, COMRAIL was critical.

Now let me take you to another aspect of the COMRAIL project. As you know, Project Hand Clasp deliver and donate lots of material, food and goods and lifts small packages. And what they did was we had an opportunity to use those goods, to deliver them to those remote areas via helicopter to those little communities that could not be reached by either surface lift or, you know, heavy airlift. So when you talk about COMRAIL and you talk about Project Hand Clasp material and you talk about the sailors, Marines and everybody else on the ship that helped deliver it, COMRAIL was a critical aspect of the Haiti mission.

Q Awesome. I wasn't sure with all the problems in that area that they'd be able to get a lot onshore. Now, I know you guys were in Curacao for a little while. I understand that that was turned into not just an R&R time but a little bit of work was done there as well.

CAPT. PONDS: That's right. You know, and the beat goes on. It's nonstop, and we were happy to do it. What we had a chance to do was we had a chance to connect a backup generator power source to a hospital.

And also, we did two days of MEDCAP, primarily optometry, in the Saint Elizabeth clinic. And that was a great opportunity for our Dutch medical officers onboard, of which we had two, to go out and provide services to the citizens of Curacao. So that was a total success, and it worked.

And we had volunteers there, too. So it was rest and relaxation. But again, it's the Navy tradition that wherever you go, you take the opportunity to conduct a COMRAIL project, and this was no different, even though we had not had the opportunity to have (delivery ?) prior to that except for two days in Puerto Rico. We took advantage of this opportunity to do some good, again, in Curacao.

Q Sure. How many Operation Smile procedures were done on the ship?

CAPT. PONDS: In Curacao?

Q Well, overall.

CAPT. PONDS: Overall on the ship?

Q Yes.

CAPT. PONDS: On the ship, we've had 104 surgeries to date. And right now here in Trinidad and Tobago, we just brought on six more patients. And our projections are that we will get at least 50 to 60 patients treated onboard the ship before we leave Trinidad and Tobago.

Q Awesome.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Q Yeah, that's it. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Chuck.

Q Good morning, Commodore. Chuck Simmons from America's North Shore Journal. I wanted to ask about your foreign component, the Dutch, the Canadians, the Brazilians, the French. Have they been onboard for the whole trip? Or do they come and go as needed? CAPT. PONDS: Okay, let's start out with my Canadian brethren. They've been onboard the entire time. And it hasn't been the same groups. They've been going back and forth. There has been an overlap, not a gap, but an overlap of the Canadian commitment to this mission. And they've been here 13, 14, 15 strong for the entire mission.

And as well, since we've been down here, we've also been able to bring down a media contingency similar to our (comeback ?) camera crew to cover the media aspect of what their contributions have been and how we're doing this operation.

Let me take you to the Brazilians. They've been onboard the entire time providing medical support.

The French, you know, they have been coming and going, but for the most part, the commitment has been there.

And our Dutch brethren, they've been onboard the entire time.

So what has happened is, you know, when we started out, we had all of the foreign partner nations onboard. And when we went to Haiti, we had the majority of them. And then when we left Haiti, the majority of those countries returned to finish up the mission.

Q All right, sir. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay, David.

Q Good morning, Commodore. It's David Axe with -- (inaudible).

CAPT. PONDS: Is this David?

Q Hi, yes.

CAPT. PONDS: Hey, how are you doing, David?

Q Good. How are you?

CAPT. PONDS: I'm doing okay.

Q Great. Can we talk about the perception issue, the strategic communications problem?

CAPT. PONDS: Okay. Well, here's my, as always, my old adage is perception is reality.

Q Right.

CAPT. PONDS: If somebody perceives it to be their perception, it could possibly be true. (Inaudible) -- strategic communication aspect to what we're doing. We don't view it through our lens, per se. We try to view it through the lens of the host nation. And we've come away with some valuable lessons learned. And we've used those lessons in stride to adjust our mission as we have gone along.

Let me give you, for example: When we went to the -- when we went to Nicaragua, we found a tremendous need. Very little infrastructure; very little -- how can I say, professional capacity there. So, we were able to go in and -- how can I say, provide our capability to a country that needed us tremendously.

Now we find ourselves in Trinidad and Tobago, and there's a need there. But there's a tremendous amount of professionalism here; they have a tremendous amount of capacity. So, we adjusted what we thought we would do based on what their desires were. So, we find ourselves partnering, more and more, with Trinidad and Tobago in doing this mission professionally than we did with Nicaragua.

In Nicaragua it was about really delivering a capability and capacity. Here in Trinidad and Tobago we found that we have been -- we have been partnering with a country that has a tremendous capacity. So, the emphasis here in Trinidad and Tobago has been "partnering." And we also partner with the previous countries, but we also knew there was a tremendous gap in capability, and we also tried to fill that gap more so than we have had to do here in Trinidad and Tobago.

But, let me go back to your question about strategic communication. The strategic communication is about security, and I think we've been able to emphasize that through our cooperation. The strategic communication has been stability. I think we've been able to communicate that through our cooperation and our partnering with our host nations.

And the strategic communication has been about prosperity. And I'm going to take you (through ?) prosperity because prosperity start with education, and the health and welfare of the citizens of those host nations. And if you look at our projects, the preponderance of our projects have been in schools and clinics. And so we think that because we have been fostering and focusing on those areas, we have been able to further prosperity, not only in those countries but in the region alike.

Q Great. Thanks.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

Garen (sp).

Q Hey, Captain Ponds. It's great talking to you.

Listening to you discuss the Continuing Promise mission, it sounds to me like everything is very tailored to the locals' needs, so this question might sound a little absurd. But, I was wondering if there's a typical day: How many people do you bring on the ship? How many sites do you put people at? How many people per site? And I understand there's probably no such thing as a typical day, but I'm just trying to get a feel for a daily operation within Continuing Promise.

CAPT. PONDS: Well, let me just tell you, the Continuing Promise mission requires a continuous day. It is non-stop. There is no break in this process ever. I mean, because when the mission stops ashore, it continues with planning on the ship. So, Continuing -- Continuous (sic) Promise off the ship is continuous operations on the ship.

So, let me give you the life in the day of a sailor onboard Kearsarge: You wake up at 4:30 in the morning. You -- you know, you clean up; you brush up; you have breakfast at 5:00. You muster at 5:30 if you're going to go on a mission -- and that's where we get the accountability of who's going ashore and what they need to do.

You're either on that helicopter, that landing craft at about 06:00 or 06:30. It normally takes you about 30 to 45 minutes to go from the ship to shore, of which you get on another transport vehicle to go to the project site, and that could be anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour and a half, depending on the traffic and the way to get there.

Once you get there, we engage immediately, and work through lunch sometimes -- or to lunch. Lunch is normally 30 minutes, which it consists of a healthy MRE right there on site, which we share with our Force Protection brethren there. We stop lunch at about 13:00 and we reengage until about 17:00. At 17:30, we breakdown the equipment we're going to bring back to the ship, or we stow that equipment that's going to be secured by the host nation. And so you get back on a bus and you travel back to the point of the embarkation -- or debarkation, and then you come back to the ship either by helicopter or by surface conveyance.

You may get back on the ship about 19:00. And they had the hiccup like last night where the waves, and the tides and currents didn't allow those individuals to get back until about 22:00. And then you come back and you're tired; and you shower; and then you eat. And then you get your orders for tomorrow.

And then you link up with the plans that has been going on while you were off the ship. And so once you get your marching orders, at 21:00; and then the day begins again at 04:30 the next day. So, that's a day in the life of a typical operation on-board the ship.

Now let's talk about the project ashore. It depends. On an average day, we have about, maybe anywhere between 100 to 150 individuals that may go ashore to cover the medical sites, the dental sites, the veterinarian sites, and the engineering sites.

Q So, you're doing one site for each dental, medical, engineering -
-?

CAPT. PONDS: Well, I mean, like, right now we have two medical sites, two dental sites, and we have a -- we're going to set up a (rove ?) and veterinarian sites. So, these things are not running consecutively, they're running concurrently. So, we could have, like, three medical sites running at the same time; and three engineering sites running at the same time.

Let me give you a snapshot of the total number of sites we've been working within the different countries: In Nicaragua we had eight projects going on -- everything from engineering and medical projects; in the Dominican Republic we had a total of -- let me see, looks like about nine sites in the

Dominican Republic; in Colombia we had -- five, six, seven -- looks like eight sites; Guyana, we're going to have 13 sites; and here in Trinidad and Tobago, we can have up to eight sites. So, again, it's a mixture of medical, dental, veterinarian and engineering sites.

Q Thank you very much, Captain.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Do we have any follow-up questions?

(No response.)

All right --

CAPT. PONDS: Are you going to let me off the hook that easy?
(Laughter.)

Q I'll ask a follow-up question.

MR. HOLT: Okay, go ahead.

Q I talk a lot on my blog -- this is Raymond Pritchett from Information Dissemination, I talk a lot on my blog about humanitarian -- proactive humanitarian missions and these medical diplomacy missions. And there's a general consensus among my readers that this is a great thing.

But the debate begins when you start talking about how -- and I don't want to get into the whole white, whole (gray ?) whole debate, but I am curious about the capability sets on the ship that you emphasize -- that you would emphasize. Like, you know, is it storage capacity? Is it your medical facilities? Is it your welldeck? Is it your aviation capabilities? What is the capability set that you think requires emphasis for these missions to be successful in deployments like Continuing Promise?

CAPT. PONDS: Everything that you just named. If I had to answer your question, I would just answer just the way you said. I mean, it all depends in what country we are. I mean, as you know, right now I just told you we are off the coast of the country, and not pier-side.

And when you're off the coast, and we call that "sea-based operations," the aviation lift, the heavy lift that's provided by the HMH Fourth and by the 53s -- MH-53s, it's a critical component of being able to lift these heavy, you know, CONEX boxes filled with materiel or supplies -- whether they be medical or engineering, deep into the host nation. It saves times on the logistics -- (inaudible) -, and also it reduces the footprint ashore.

And then let's talk about also the surface lift. Some of these countries have very well-developed ports, some of them -- some of them do not. So, when we can't go pier-side, we have to use the LCMs and the LCUs that are normally used for landing Marines, but now we landing humanitarian assistance and supplies. I mean, so it's critical to be able to broach the beach to get that humanitarian assistance across the beach.

Now, let's talk about the on-board capacity. This ship, as you know, is second only to the U.S.N.S. Comfort and the U.S.N.S. Mercy for being able to deliver this medical capacity. And so whether the ship is gray, white or green,

it's the function that it brings, it's the capacity and the capability that it brings. Just because it has an LHD-3 on it -- I mean, the host nation doesn't care what the number is, or the color, all he cares about is that this ship is bringing a critical capability by sea, air and shore to their citizens.

And that's all they care about. And you know what? That's all we care about. We are no threat to any host-nation down here because we are here on a humanitarian assistance mission. That is it. Period. Point-blank. So, I think the strategic communication sometimes gets lost in the media when it gets -- and when they try to portray this ship to be doing something that it is not. This is an HA mission. This happened to be a (gray hold ?) conducting an HA -- carrying out HA operations.

Q Captain, has your ship been full? I mean, when you deployed, where you've just crammed in everything you possibly could, like the Marines were deploying? I mean, I know how the Marines deploy. Their loading plans are to pack everything you possibly can. Was that the way you guys are deployed, or do you still have capacity? Is there -- is there non-governmental organization capacity that you could support?

CAPT. PONDS: Oh yeah. Yeah, when we left we were -- we were packed in -- stem to stern, port to starboard. I mean, you couldn't move anything because, between the vehicles, the boats and the supplies -- I mean, it was, it was loaded out.

But, as we moved from one country to another country, we've expended and used those supplies and that equipment, and so we created space because of that. So when we get back we hope to be empty of only -- everything that we needed to do the job. So, yes, we can accommodate. And, again, that's what makes this ship so perfect for HADR missions, because if we had to go and support another hurricane, or whatnot, we could on-load the necessary supplies and equipment and go out and do that mission.

MR. HOLT: All right.

Q Thank you, Captain.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Anyone else?

Q Yeah, this is Chuck. MR. HOLT: Okay, Chuck.

Q I wanted to kind of follow up on that. There's been a lot of discussion on various blogs about the civilian versus the military nature of these kinds of missions. And I've argued that your class of ship is pretty much ideal for a humanitarian mission that, at least, is not the size of a tsunami.

If you needed additional capacity to do HA missions, where would you -- where would you want to add it? And if there are any reaction from the people that you deal with in the host countries that you're military versus civilian?

CAPT. PONDS: Let me go to your first question first.

If I needed capacity I would have to go through Fourth Fleet; and then they would go to SOUTHCOM to source that additional capacity --

Q Right, but what I'm -- what I was -- (inaudible) -- was that, given your current vessel, if you had to make a change in the vessel itself for HA, what would you, what would you want to add?

CAPT. PONDS: Well, goodness gracious, that would be -- I think it's a -- I think it's a well-balanced ship to carry out the range of requirements that this mission demands. If I had to change anything on this ship I guess -- (laughs) -- you got me. This is the perfect platform. It is. I got to tell you, it is.

Let me go to your second question.

The second question was -- make sure I got it, the disparity or the balance between military and civilians on-board the ship?

Q No, how do the, how do the locals react to the military? The number of the nations that you've dealt with -- Nicaragua in particular, had different experiences with the American military over the last 100 years, and I'm just wondering how the military relates to the locals?

CAPT. PONDS: Okay, I got to tell you, they relate perfectly.

Most of the military personnel that's on the ship -- other than the doctors and the dentists and whatnot, they are here to operate the ship, except for the volunteers that leave the ship to do painting, and the landscaping and the -- (inaudible) -- projects, the preponderance of the ship's force remain on-board the ship.

And we do have these subject-matter expert exchange programs. We bring the military personnel on-board the ship to exchange best practices and good ideas on the different areas, like engineering, and whatnot. But, for the most part, unless there is a volunteer requirement, the preponderance of the sailors remain on the ship.

And so what you have that's going out -- you know, military doctors and dentists, but another aspect of that is the United States Public Health Service. And, you know, they wear uniforms, but they are a Public Health Service.

So, the relationship between those in uniform -- whether they be Public Health Service, or non-governmental organizations, that I highlighted earlier -- and our partner nations, I think it's pretty transparent because it's all about the relationship. And I think the relationship is clear that we're here to help them and we're here to work with them. And we're not here to obviate any capacity that already exists.

So, I don't think it really matters because they know why we're here. And we reinforce that every day in our interactions with the host nation.

Q Okay, thank you, sir. MR. HOLT: Okay.

All right, anything else?

Q I have one last question -- and Commodore, it's Tom Crowe (sp) again, and it's a bit of a softball, but it kind of goes along with the sort of thing I've been trying to write about this whole mission anyway.

Do you have any exceptional cases of -- you know, 'it's a good thing we got here when we did, because we were able to help out with this, that? If we had come a week later, would have been a bigger disaster and we wouldn't -- (inaudible) -- would have been, well, bigger disaster?' Do you have any exceptional cases like that?

CAPT. PONDS: Yes. Haiti. If we had not been where we were, every day would have been -- resulted in the loss of life, property, and just devastation and the destruction would have been just, have increased every day.

As far as the other countries are concerned, these are deliberate missions, and that's why they are humanitarian assistance missions. The difference between the HA mission and the HADR mission -- (or ?) the ability to plan it out in a deliberate manner, versus, in Haiti, responding in a crisis action manner where we had to actually plan to execute enroute.

So time was only of the essence as far as Haiti was concerned. Everything else, we've been planning this for months, and we just had a chance to execute what we planned. And the mission that's going to follow us started as soon as we left as well.

So, when you're talking about -- when you talk about the need for expediency, I cannot, I cannot categorize the HA mission as being an expedient mission; but as far as the DR mission in Haiti, most definitely a mission that was -- that demanded expediency.

Q Okay. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right.

CAPT. PONDS: You're welcome.

MR. HOLT: Okay, anyone else?

Q Can I throw in a quick thing off-topic?

MR. HOLT: Sure.

Q Commander, could you tell me what happened on the ship on the Navy's birthday? Did you guys get to celebrate it in any way? CAPT. PONDS: Yeah. And when I'm done I want you to get a -- I want to get your e-mail because I want to send you this. And maybe you read it on my blog, because I do have a blog, and I want you to go to it --

Q I do.

CAPT. PONDS: -- I get quite a few hits every day.

You do?

Q Of course I do. I one of your crew too. I'm the one that was down in troop berthing.

CAPT. PONDS: Oh, that stands to figure.

Q (Laughs.) I was in female troop berthing, (Chuck ?). (Laughs.)

CAPT. PONDS: Oh, that's right.

Here's what -- here's, let me tell you what happened on the Navy birthday. The captain on here, Commander -- Captain Walt Towns, as you know, he came aboard the ship three days before we deployed. And what we did for the Navy's birthday was tremendous. I mean, I've been in the Navy for 25 years and this is the first time I've saw this.

We stopped -- we didn't (lay to ?), but we sort of, stopped all operations on the ship, except for essential the personnel for safety and operations, and we had a Navy day celebration in the hangar bay. And what that celebration consisted of, we had a three-layer cake; we had a band on the ship; and we had the khaki officers and chiefs on the ship to serve food to the crew on the ship.

That was a tremendous gesture of appreciation for what they do, not only for the mission, but for us every day to support what we do. So, the captain took the time out on that day to dedicate it to what we can do -- our contribution and dedication to the crew itself.

You know, when you're an E1 or E2 or E3 when you walk around and you're doing your job, most often it's very hard for somebody to say, "great job" every day. But, this was one day that was set aside just for those sailors to say, listen, we truly appreciate you as our most valuable commodity, our most valuable resource, our most valuable asset on-board -- in this organization.

And this was our opportunity to do that. And, to a sailor, every one -- Coast Guards, airmen and Marine, they appreciated what we did that day for them. And I got to tell you, there's no greater honor than to serve somebody that serves our country every day, and this was our day to -- our day to do that and we felt good about doing it.

Q That's excellent. Thank you. MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

And Commodore Frank Ponds, the commodore of the U.S.S. Kearsarge, and Continuing Promise '08 with us with the Bloggers Roundtable today.

Thanks for being with us today, sir. We really appreciate this.

CAPT. PONDS: Yes, indeed. It's my pleasure.

END.